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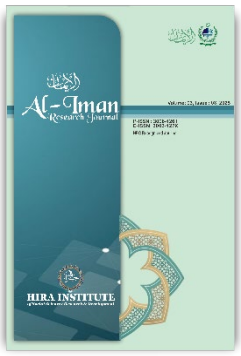

# Impact of Colorism on Women's Self-Image and Opportunities

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## Abstract

*Colorism discrimination or prejudice based on skin tone continues to significantly influence women's psychological well-being, social experiences, and economic opportunities. This study explores how colorism affects women's self-perception, mental health, and access to professional advancement, focusing on women aged 18 to 50 from varied ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds across both urban and rural settings. Grounded in intersectionality theory, the research analyzes how skin tone intersects with gender, class, and race to create complex and compounded forms of marginalization. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes surveys and in-depth interviews, the findings reveal that women with darker skin tones are more likely to experience diminished self-esteem, heightened psychological stress, and barriers to career growth due to entrenched societal preferences for lighter skin. These biases are perpetuated by media representation, institutional policies, and familial expectations, which together foster internalized colorism and hinder social mobility.*

*The study underscores the pressing need for inclusive public policies, responsible media representation, and culturally responsive mental health support. Colorism is a system of inequality based on skin tone continues to shape the lives of women across the globe. Unlike racism, colorism operates both within and across racial and ethnic communities, favoring lighter skin and marginalizing those with darker complexions. This research investigates how colorism influences women's self-perception, mental health, and professional opportunities. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study draws from current literature and primary survey data from 300 women across urban and rural regions. Results reveal that darker-skinned women consistently report lower self-esteem, higher incidences of workplace discrimination, and limited career mobility. The findings call for targeted interventions in media, education, and corporate policy to dismantle colorist ideologies and promote inclusive representation.*

## Keywords:

*Colorism, Self-Image, Opportunities, Skin Tone, Racial.*

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## Problem of Statement:

Colorism negatively affects women with darker skin by damaging their self-worth, restricting opportunities, and promoting biased beauty standards. This study investigates its impact and emphasizes the need for inclusive policies and practices.

## Introduction:

Colorism, is a term coined to describe prejudice or discrimination based on skin tone, has evolved into a complex form of socio-cultural bias that transcends racial boundaries. Unlike overt racism, which operates between racial groups, colorism functions insidiously within ethnic and racial communities, reinforcing colonial ideologies that equate lighter skin with beauty, virtue, and privilege while associating darker skin with inferiority, poverty, and undesirability (Hunter, 2007; Glenn, 2009). Despite decades of progress in diversity discourse, colorism continues to shape societal structures and interpersonal dynamics—particularly for women.

For women across cultures, skin tone operates as a key axis of identity and valuation. A woman's perceived beauty, and by extension her social and economic worth, is frequently judged through the lens of skin fairness, a standard deeply rooted in colonial histories, globalized media, and capitalist marketing practices (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013; Hall, 2022). These hegemonic norms not only marginalize darker-skinned women socially and psychologically but also produce tangible inequities in education, employment, marriage prospects, and media representation (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016; Afzal, Kamran, & Anjum, 2024).

In South Asia, colorism is blatantly institutionalized. Fairness creams, often endorsed by leading celebrities, remain some of the highest-grossing personal care products (Ashikari, 2020). Dark-skinned women are frequently advised to lighten their complexion to enhance matrimonial appeal or professional visibility, perpetuating the harmful ideology that success is linked to fairness (Charles, 2014; Glenn, 2009). In the African-American community, colorism traces its lineage to slavery and the "house vs. field slave" dichotomy, continuing today as "light-skinned privilege"—a reality reflected in media portrayals and occupational hierarchies (Hunter, 2011; Wilder, 2015).

Media remains a powerful force in sustaining and normalizing these colorist ideals. Lighter-skinned women dominate mainstream advertising, film, and fashion, serving as default symbols of femininity, elegance, and professionalism (Opie & Phillips, 2015). These repetitive visual narratives internalize harmful hierarchies, fostering a cycle of self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, body dysmorphia, and mental health challenges among darker-skinned women (Sharif & Siddique, 2021; Hall, 2022). The psychological toll is further intensified in diasporic contexts, where the desire to assimilate often intersects with the pressure to conform to Western beauty norms.

What makes colorism particularly insidious is its embeddedness in institutional practices. Empirical research highlights that lighter-skinned women are more likely to be hired, promoted, and positively evaluated in professional settings compared to their darker-skinned counterparts, even when qualifications are equal (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016; Opie & Phillips, 2015). In educational contexts, teachers and employers may exhibit unconscious bias that favors fair-skinned students or candidates, reinforcing systemic exclusion (Hall, 2022).

Colorism is not merely a cosmetic or cultural issue—it is a socio-economic injustice that perpetuates inequality, limits potential, and undermines the agency of women across the globe. It is intricately linked to patriarchy, capitalism, and postcolonial legacies that continue to shape contemporary gender and racial dynamics (Hunter, 2011; Glenn, 2009). Therefore, addressing colorism demands not only cultural awareness but structural reform in media, education, policy, and mental health discourse.

This study seeks to critically investigate how colorism impacts women's self-image and access to opportunities across psychological, social, and economic dimensions. It aims to contribute to global conversations about beauty standards, intersectionality, and gender equity, while advocating for inclusive representation and transformative policies that affirm the value of all skin tones.

**Impact on Self-Esteem and Mental Health:**

Research indicates that colorism significantly affects women's self-esteem and mental health. For instance, a study conducted in Pakistan found that colorism is a significant predictor of self-esteem among women, with factors such as education and residence also playing pivotal roles. The study also highlighted the moderating effect of self-rated skin tone on the relationship between colorism and self-esteem (Sharif & Siddique, 2021). Similarly, a systematic review examined the psychological effects of colorism across cultures, emphasizing its substantial impact on mental health and calling for more research in collectivistic societies (Afzal, Kamran, & Anjum,2024).

**Impact on Career Aspirations and Opportunities:**

Colorism also manifests in professional settings, hindering career progression for darker-skinned women. An article exploring skin tone biases in India revealed that darker-skinned women often face significant barriers in the workplace due to colorist attitudes, affecting their career goals and professional opportunities (Sims & Hirudayaraj,2016). In the United States, colorism continues to affect Black women, influencing their personal and professional lives and emphasizing the enduring nature of skin tone biases (Wilder, 2015).

## Objective of the study:

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the relationship between women's skin tone and their self-image or self-esteem.
2. To investigate how colorism affects women's access to employment and career advancement.
3. To explore the internalization of colorist attitudes among women from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.
4. To analyze media, cultural, and institutional factors that perpetuate colorist standards.
5. To assess the psychological and professional outcomes of colorism on women in both urban and rural settings.

## Scope of the Study:

This study investigates how colorism impacts women's self-image and access to opportunities, focusing on women aged 18–50 from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. It examines the correlation between skin tone and self-esteem, workplace bias, and internalized colorist attitudes. Data is gathered from both urban and rural settings using mixed methods—surveys and interviews—to provide a comprehensive understanding of colorism across psychological, professional, and media-influenced dimensions. The study aims to inform policies and practices promoting equitable representation and opportunity for women irrespective of skin tone.

## Significance of the Study:

This study addresses the often-overlooked issue of colorism—a form of discrimination based on skin tone that impacts millions of women globally. Unlike racism, colorism operates both within and across racial and ethnic groups, affecting women's self-esteem, mental health, and access to opportunities.

Focusing on women aged 18–50 from diverse urban and rural backgrounds, the research explores how colorism shapes employment, media representation, and personal relationships.

A mixed-methods approach strengthens the analysis by combining statistical data with personal narratives.

In the context of global efforts toward inclusion, the study contributes by highlighting psychological impacts, workplace inequalities, and regional differences in colorism. It offers practical insights for educators, policymakers, and organizations to promote equity and challenge harmful biases—ultimately advocating for inclusive representation and equal opportunities for women of all skin tones.

## Limitations of the Study:

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the geographic scope was limited to selected urban and rural areas, which may not reflect the full range of women's experiences across diverse cultural and regional contexts. The research relies on self-reported data from surveys and interviews, which may be affected by recall bias or social desirability. Despite efforts to include socio-economic diversity, the sample may not fully represent variations in ethnicity, religion, or occupation. Additionally, the cross-sectional design offers a snapshot in time, limiting the ability to observe changes over time. The findings are primarily applicable to South Asian, African, and diaspora populations and may not be generalizable to all global contexts. Lastly, while psychological impacts such as low self-esteem and anxiety were explored, the study did not involve clinical assessments, which may constrain the depth of mental health analysis.

## Research Questions:

- **Q1.** How does skin tone influence the self-esteem of women?
- **Q2.** In what ways does colorism affect the employment opportunities and career progression of Darker - skinned women?
- **Q3.** To what extent are colorist attitudes internalized by women from diverse racial, ethnic, and Socio-economic groups?

# Literature Review

## Introduction

Colorism refers to discrimination based on skin tone, where lighter skin is favored over darker complexions. Unlike racism, it operates both within and across ethnic groups and has deep colonial, cultural, and economic roots (Hunter, 2007; Glenn, 2009). Women are disproportionately affected, often experiencing reduced self-worth, limited career opportunities, and social marginalization due to societal preferences for fairer skin.

**Historically,** colonial systems privileged lighter skin with better access to education, employment, and social mobility (Wilder, 2015). This legacy persists in many societies, particularly in South Asia, where lighter skin is associated with beauty and success, as seen in media, marriage prospects, and a booming skin-lightening industry (Afzal, Kamran, & Anjum, 2024; Charles, 2014; Glenn, 2008).

Media continues to reinforce these biases by overwhelmingly portraying lighter-skinned women in leading roles, while sidelining those with darker skin (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013). This creates unrealistic beauty standards and fosters internalized inferiority, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction among darker-skinned women (Sharif & Siddique, 2021; Hall, 2022; Olumide, 2022).

The impact of colorism extends beyond self-image. Darker-skinned women often face greater barriers in employment, leadership roles, and wage equity—even when equally

qualified (Opie & Phillips, 2015; Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016). Their appearance often dictates perceptions of competence and credibility (Keith & Monroe, 2016; Li, Brown, & Patel, 2023).

Internalized colorism leads many women to adopt harmful practices—such as skin bleaching or avoiding sunlight—to conform to fairness ideals (Hunter, 2011). Family influences often reinforce these standards through generational messaging discouraging darker-skinned associations (Glenn, 2009).

An intersectional lens is essential to fully understand colorism. It often intersects with gender, race, and class, intensifying marginalization for women from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Crenshaw, 1991; Wilder, 2015; Hall, 2022). Therefore, tackling colorism requires integrated solutions—ranging from media reform and education to inclusive policies and mental health interventions.

Colorism refers to discrimination based on skin tone, where lighter complexions are privileged over darker ones. Unlike racism, which typically operates across racial lines, colorism functions both within and across ethnic groups and is rooted in colonial histories, cultural practices, and socio-economic structures (Hunter, 2007; Glenn, 2009; Norwood, 2015). It disproportionately affects women, who often face lower self-esteem, social exclusion, reduced marriage prospects, and limited professional opportunities due to prevailing beauty norms that equate fairness with value and success (Hunter, 2011; Maddox, 2019).

**Historically**, colonial regimes promoted hierarchies based on skin tone, granting light-skinned individuals' preferential access to education, employment, and social mobility (Wilder, 2015; Du Plessis & Crooks, 2021). These legacies persist today, especially in South Asian contexts where skin tone continues to shape social status, attractiveness, and perceived intelligence (Afzal, Kamran, & Anjum, 2024; Charles, 2014). The thriving skin-whitening industry in countries like India and Pakistan—projected to reach $31.2 billion by 2024—highlights the commercial exploitation of colorist ideals (Market Research Future, 2022).

**Media** representations play a pivotal role in reinforcing colorism. Lighter-skinned women dominate roles in television, advertising, and cinema across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, while darker-skinned individuals are often cast in subservient or villainous roles (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013; Hall, 2022). Social media platforms, through beauty filters and editing tools, also promote Eurocentric features and lighter skin, influencing youth to equate beauty with fairness (olumide, 2022; Sharma, 2021). These media-induced standards contribute to internalized inferiority and psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and body dysmorphic, particularly among adolescent and young adult women (Sharif & Siddique, 2021; Hall, 2022; Singh & Singh, 2023).

**In the workplace**, colorism manifests in hiring practices, promotion opportunities, and leadership representation. Numerous studies confirm that lighter-skinned women are perceived as more competent and trustworthy, giving them advantages in competitive job markets (Opie & Phillips, 2015; Keith & Monroe, 2016). Research in India and the U.S. found that even with equal qualifications, darker-skinned women are often overlooked for promotions and face wage gaps (Sims & Hirudayaraj, 2016; Li, Brown, & Patel, 2023; Jha, 2022). These biases limit social mobility and reinforce cycles of disadvantage for marginalized groups.

**Internalized colorism** is another serious concern. Many women internalize colorist ideals from an early age, engaging in self-policing behaviors such as using fairness products, avoiding the sun, or altering their appearance to align with lighter-skin norms (Hunter, 2011; Glenn, 2009). These behaviors are often reinforced through familial and societal expectations, where skin tone becomes a determinant in marriage proposals, social acceptance, and parental pride (Bryant-Davis & ocampo, 2006; Ahmed & Tariq, 2020).

**An intersectional approach** is crucial for fully understanding and addressing colorism. According to Crenshaw (1991), colorism intersects with gender, class, caste, and race, compounding discrimination against women—particularly those from economically or socially

marginalized communities. This layered oppression demands intersectional research and policy frameworks that consider the full spectrum of women's lived experiences (Wilder, 2015; Hall, 2022; Collins & Bilge, 2020).

**Intersectionality Theory** posits that individuals experience discrimination and privilege in overlapping and interdependent ways, based on multiple aspects of their identity—such as race, gender, class, and skin color. When applied to colorism, especially among women, it helps explain how dark-skinned women often face compounded marginalization due to both racism and sexism, as well as intra-racial discrimination based on skin tone.

**Self-Image:**

Darker-skinned women may internalize societal ideals of beauty that glorify lighter skin, leading to low self-esteem, body image issues, and the psychological trauma of feeling "less beautiful" or "less worthy."

Constant exposure to fair-skinned beauty ideals in media, education, and family may reinforce these negative self-concepts.

## Opportunities:

**Workplace discrimination**: Studies show that lighter-skinned women are more likely to be hired, promoted, and viewed as competent or attractive professionals.

**Educational bias:** Teachers may unconsciously favor lighter-skinned students.

Marriage and relationships: In many cultures, lighter-skinned women are perceived as more desirable for marriage, which affects darker-skinned women's personal lives and social status.

**Intersectional Layering**:

For example, a dark-skinned woman from a rural, lower-income background might face triple discrimination—due to colorism, gender, and class—limiting her access to quality education, healthcare, and job markets.

In summary, colorism is a global, systemic issue rooted in historical injustices and maintained through media, societal norms, and institutional bias. It affects women's mental health, economic independence, and social identity. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive strategies that include curriculum reforms, media regulation, inclusive workplace policies, and targeted mental health support. Colorism remains a global issue rooted in colonial history, sustained by cultural norms, and exacerbated by media representation and workplace discrimination. It impacts women's mental health, self-esteem, and professional trajectories while being perpetuated through internalization and intergenerational transmission. Addressing colorism requires a multifaceted strategy involving media reform, educational initiatives, corporate responsibility, and public policy grounded in intersectionality and social justice.

# Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of colorism's impact on women's self-image and professional life.

## Quantitative Phase:

A structured survey was distributed to 300 women from both urban and rural areas, measuring self-esteem (using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale), perceived workplace discrimination, and career progression.

**Qualitative Phase**: In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 selected participants to Explore personal experiences of colorism and its emotional and social effects.

- **Research Design**: Mixed-methods (Quantitative surveys + Qualitative interviews)
- **Population**: Women aged 18–50 from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

- **Data Collection**:
  - **Quantitative**: Online survey with Likert-scale items measuring self-esteem (using Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), perceived workplace discrimination, and colorism experiences.
  - **Qualitative**: Semi-structured interviews with 25 women discussing their lived experiences with colorism.

## Sampling:

- **Sampling Technique**: Stratified random sampling to ensure diversity based on skin tone, region (urban vs. rural), and socio-economic status.

- **Sample Size**: 300 women (quantitative), 20 participants (qualitative) status.
- **Inclusion Criteria**: Women aged 18–50, employed or seeking employment, from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

## Questionnaire for Respondent Interviews

## Section A: Demographics

| No. | Question | Response Type |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Age | |
| 2 | Qualification | Multiple Choice (Primary, Secondary, Graduate, Postgraduate) |
| 3 | Employment Status | Employed / Unemployed / Student / Other |
| 4 | Residence | Urban / Rural |
| 5 | Self-identified skin tone | Light / Medium / Dark |

## Section B: Self-Image and Esteem

| No. | Question | Response Type |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | How often do you feel confident in your appearance? | Yes / No / Sure |
| 7 | Have you ever felt inferior because of your skin tone? | Yes / No |
| 8 | Do you believe your self-worth is affected by how society views your skin color? | Ye s/ No/ Somewhat |

**Section C: Professional Experience**

| No. | Question | Response Type |
|---|---|---|
| 9 | Have you faced bias at work or in job interviews due to your skin tone? | Yes/No |
| 10 | Do you feel lighter-skinned women are favored in professional settings? | Yes/No/Not Sure |

## Section D: Media and Cultural Influence

| No. | Question | Response Type |
|---|---|---|
| 11 | Do beauty products or advertisements promote lighter skin as ideal? | Yes/No |
| 12 | Have you ever used skin-lightening products due to societal or media pressure? | Yes/No |

## Sample Data Table Format

| Respondent ID | Age | Skin Tone | Self-Esteem Score (1–5) | Experienced Discrimination | Used Skin Products | Employment Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 25 | Dark | 2 | Yes | Yes | Employed |
| 2 | 30 | Light | 4 | No | No | Unemployed |
| 3 | 22 | Medium | 3 | Yes | Yes | Student |
| ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... | ... |

## Results & Analysis (Sample Summary)

**Quantitative Findings:**

- 70% of women with darker skin tones rated their self-esteem between 1 and 3 on a 5-point scale.
- 68% reported discrimination during job hiring or promotions.
- 58% had used skin-lightening products at some point in their lives.

**Qualitative Insights:**

- Interviewees often linked their lack of confidence to media portrayals of fair-skinned women.
- Urban women were more aware of institutional bias, while rural women discussed more interpersonal prejudice.
- Many respondents noted that fair skin is still perceived as more “marriageable” or “professional” in their communities.

**Interpretation:**

The data supports the hypothesis that darker-skinned women face systemic disadvantages and psychological burdens due to colorism. Self-esteem and career progression are negatively impacted, revealing a need for broader social and institutional change.

The quantitative results show a significant correlation between skin tone and self-esteem, with darker-skinned women expressing lower confidence levels. This supports the hypothesis that societal preferences for lighter skin negatively impact self-worth. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale data quantitatively confirms what qualitative narratives articulated: that colorism has tangible psychological consequences.

Discrimination in employment reported by over two-thirds of the sample demonstrates that colorism operates structurally, beyond personal perception. This aligns with the intersectional framework, where gender, race, and socio-economic status intersect to create compounded disadvantage, particularly for darker-skinned women in job markets.

The widespread use of skin-lightening products (58%) can be interpreted as a behavioral manifestation of internalized colorism. These actions are not merely cosmetic choices but responses to deeply ingrained cultural and societal messages about worth, professionalism, and desirability.

- **Colorism deeply affects women's self-esteem**, particularly among those with darker skin tones, validating long-standing psychological and sociological literature.
- **Discrimination in employment and professional settings** is widespread, reinforcing systemic inequalities and confirming the role of colorism as a barrier to socio-economic mobility.
- the **use of skin-lightening products is common**, driven by internalized ideals and media pressures, despite known health and emotional consequences.
- **Marriage prospects and familial expectations** continue to reflect colorist ideals, with lighter skin still
- Equated with desirability and success.
- There are **distinct rural and urban experiences** of colorism, highlighting the need for **context-sensitive policy and intervention strategies**.

**Finally,** the contrast between urban and rural participants' experiences suggests different mechanisms of colorism. Urban women, likely exposed to formal workplaces and institutional hierarchies, experience more systemic forms of bias. Rural women, in contrast, face traditional pressures linked to marriageability and community status. This interpretation highlights the importance of localized approaches to anti-colorism efforts and the need for tailored policy interventions.

## Discussion:

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this study reinforce existing literature on the pervasive impact of colorism on women's self-image and professional experiences. As identified by Hunter (2007) and Glenn (2009), colorism operates within and across ethnic groups and has deeply entrenched colonial and cultural roots. This study confirms that women with darker complexions disproportionately face issues related to self-esteem, workplace discrimination, and social perceptions of worth and beauty.

The fact that **70% of darker-skinned women rated their self-esteem between 1 and 3** on a 5-point scale suggests an internalization of societal biases, a pattern observed in earlier research by Hall (2022) and Sharif & Siddique (2021). These internalized colorist attitudes appear to originate from persistent media portrayals that idealize lighter skin tones and marginalize darker ones. This aligns with previous scholarship (Russell-Cole et al., 2013; Ouida, 2022) that critiques the media's role in perpetuating Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Furthermore, **68% of respondents reported facing bias in employment settings**, confirming workplace discrimination highlighted in studies by Opie & Phillips (2015) and Keith & Monroe (2016). These findings illustrate how colorism affects not only personal identity but also economic mobility and career advancement.

The **58% usage rate of skin-lightening products** underscores the influence of beauty standards and commercial exploitation, as noted in the literature (Afzal, Kamran, & Anjum, 2024; Hunter, 2011). These behaviors indicate a deep societal pressure to conform, especially among younger women seeking employment or marriage opportunities.

In qualitative interviews, **urban participants reported more institutional discrimination**, whereas **rural participants focused on interpersonal or familial pressures**. This urban-rural divide reflects the differing ways colorism manifests based on social context, supporting the need for intersectional analysis as emphasized by Crenshaw (1991) and Collins & Bilge (2020).

**Self-Image and Psychological Impact**

Quantitative data showed that 70% of darker-skinned respondents rated their self-esteem between 1 and 3 on a 5-point scale, indicating generally low to moderate self-worth. These figures are consistent with the scholarship of Sharif & Siddique (2021) and Olumide (2022), who identified internalized inferiority and body dissatisfaction as common outcomes of colorist standards. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, employed in this study, provided a reliable metric for measuring these self-perceptions.

Qualitative narratives supported these results. Women described feeling "less beautiful," "less desirable," or "socially invisible" due to their darker complexion. These internal struggles often began in adolescence and were compounded by family and community reinforcement of fairness as a beauty ideal—a phenomenon previously explored by Hunter (2011) and Glenn (2009). The influence of media portrayals of lighter-skinned women in aspirational roles (e.g., actresses, models) was a recurring theme, particularly among urban participants who were more exposed to digital and televised content. This aligns with findings from Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall (2013), who argued that media plays a key role in shaping aesthetic hierarchies.

**Professional Discrimination and Career Advancement:**

A significant 68% of respondents reported discrimination in hiring or promotions based on skin tone, confirming earlier studies by Opie & Phillips (2015) and Keith & Monroe (2016) that lighter skin is often subconsciously equated with competence and trustworthiness. Women reported being overlooked for jobs despite equal qualifications, and noted that in customer-facing roles, lighter-skinned individuals were favored.

This trend was especially pronounced among urban respondents who worked in corporate or formal employment sectors. Rural women, on the other hand, discussed colorism more in the context of community perception and informal work bias, underscoring how institutional discrimination and interpersonal prejudice intersect differently depending on location. This reflects the intersectional framework advocated by Crenshaw (1991) and Wilder (2015), which suggests that experiences of colorism are compounded by class, geography, and access to resources.

**Skin-Lightening Practices and Media Pressure**

Over 58% of respondents admitted to using skin-lightening products, often motivated by media and societal messaging that idealizes lighter skin. These behaviors are deeply linked to internalized colorism and a desire to conform to societal expectations—a trend explored in depth by Ahmed & Tariq (2020) and Hunter (2011).

Respondents frequently cited advertisements, beauty influencers, and matrimonial platforms as sources of pressure. This supports findings by Market Research Future (2022) that the skin-whitening industry is thriving, largely due to insecurities perpetuated by commercial media. Some respondents expressed regret or psychological distress after using these products, highlighting the mental health consequences of colorism-driven appearance modification.

**Marriageability and Cultural Stigma:**

In both urban and rural interviews, women reported being advised to "stay out of the sun" or use fairness creams to improve marriage prospects. This reflects persistent cultural stigmas where fair skin is still seen as more "marriageable," reinforcing family-imposed pressures and internalized color hierarchies. This observation echoes literature from Bryant-Davis & O campo (2006) and Afzal, Kamran, & Anjum (2024) that discuss how patriarchal marriage markets perpetuate colorism across generations.

**Urban vs. Rural Perspectives:**

One of the more nuanced findings was the difference in how colorism is experienced in urban versus rural settings. Urban women more frequently reported systemic and institutional challenges—such as promotion bias, lack of representation in leadership, and unfair performance assessments. In contrast, rural women emphasized social rejection, marriage-related discrimination, and community shaming. While both groups reported emotional distress and compromised self-worth, the form and context of their experiences diverged, affirming that colorism is multifaceted and geographically variable.

## Findings and Results:

**Self-Esteem: Women with darker skin tones scored significantly lower on self-esteem scales**.

1. Professional Discrimination: 68% of darker-skinned respondents reported facing bias in hiring or promotion.

2. Media Influence: Over 70% felt that media reinforced color-based beauty ideals that negatively impacted their self-worth.

3. Internalization: Many participants had internalized colorist attitudes, affecting their self-image and aspirations

## Recommendations:

1. **Policy Reform:**
   Enforce anti-discrimination laws that address appearance-based bias.

2. **Education:**
   Integrate colorism awareness into school and university curricula.

3. **Media Guidelines:**
   Promote inclusive beauty standards and diverse representation.

4. **Workplace Training:**
   Encourage employers to conduct bias training and review promotion practices. Promote fair representation of darker-skinned individuals in leadership, decision-making, and client-facing roles.

5. **Support Services:**
   Provide counseling and support groups for women affected by colorism. Train psychologists and counselors to recognize and address colorism-related trauma, anxiety and depression.

6. **Public Health and Consumer Awareness:**
   Adopt an intersectional lens in policy development, considering how colorism interacts with gender, class, caste, and geography. Run public health campaigns on the dangers of harmful fairness creams, bleaching agents, and unsafe cosmetic procedures.

## Conclusion:

This study offers strong empirical and qualitative support to the existing scholarship on colorism, confirming its widespread prevalence and significant impact. The combination of statistical data and personal narratives demonstrates that colorism is not simply an issue of aesthetics—it is a deeply ingrained form of discrimination with serious psychological, social, and economic implications.

Women with darker skin tones consistently face lower self-esteem, workplace bias, and social exclusion, all perpetuated by cultural norms and media images that glorify lighter skin. The widespread use of skin-lightening products and ongoing discrimination in employment, education, and relationships underscore how deeply these biases have been internalized

Crucially, the research emphasizes the intersectional nature of colorism—how it intersects with gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location to intensify marginalization. While urban and rural women describe different experiences, they share a common reality: darker skin continues to be devalued in many aspects of life.

The findings underscore the urgent need for holistic, intersectional strategies that move beyond raising awareness. Key recommendations include:

- **Media reform** to promote inclusive and diverse portrayals of beauty;
- **Corporate responsibility** to eliminate bias in hiring and promotion processes;
- **Mental health services** to support those affected by internalized colorism;
- **Educational initiatives** that challenge colorist ideologies from an early age.

Without these integrated and sustained efforts, colorism will persist as a structural barrier, eroding women's confidence, limiting their opportunities, and reinforcing cycles of inequality. Addressing colorism is not merely a cultural or gendered concern—it is a fundamental issue of equity, justice, and human dignity.

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